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**Inequality, Culture and Globalization in Emerging Societies:  
reflections on the Brazilian case<sup>1</sup>**

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## *Introduction*

A key issue in the global debate is inequality. There is nothing new about the existence of it as a persisting feature of capitalism. Despite the historic compromise achieved after the Second World War that led to higher integration of workers into the social and economic orders of capitalist societies in Western Europe, the system fell short of promoting equality of conditions, beyond the formal legal status of all citizens in liberal democratic polities. In the so-called periphery of the capitalist world, inequality remained as the unbending rule of protracted processes of uneven and combined development which prompted sociologies of underdevelopment, marginality, dependency, and so forth. The promise was that accelerating the pace of economic growth and technological innovation, the peripheral countries would all attain the bright future of modernization. Despite all the criticism – both theoretical and practical – met with along the 1970s by such ideological representations of capitalism as a historic form able to produce widespread prosperity and social integration, the rise and global expansion of neoliberal discourse and policies reinforced the conventional association between the adoption of market economies and better opportunities for all.

As from the mid-1990s a growing number of voices began to be heard which pointed towards the increase in inequalities worldwide as a result of the implementation of neoliberal and Third-Way policies. Data on the spread or intensification of inequalities over the recent decades are simply breathtaking: it has increased rather than diminished (cf. Green, 2008, p. 2-6, 180-81, 186-90, 224; Ipea/IBGE, 2004, p. 14-21, 36-42; UNDP, 2005). It increases in several contexts even though extreme poverty has decreased since the 1990s. Which means that the old story holds true according to which more wealth and skin-deep social policies do not translate into less inequality. This of course contrasts with all the luring promises of a deeper interconnectedness among economies, societies and cultures for furthering well-being, freedom, choice and progress. Persisting inequality also flies in the face of the concrete possibility for the global economy to actually end poverty, thus highlighting the inevitable ethical and political intimations to seriously respond to the challenge.

The period above coincides with a process of emergence of new candidates to the select team of global capitalist players, attributed at first to economic performance – societies with huge and under-explored internal markets, abundant and cheap labour, relatively sophisticated technological base, that were going through market reforms and taking advantage of the global scenario. Only slowly and unevenly some awareness developed as regards both the multi-dimensional character of globalization and the extent to which the new partners could not and would not reiterate the paradigm of modernization. Accordingly, assessments of perspectives opened up by global flows, despite attempts by hegemonic forces to round everything up under the spell of economic interests and dynamics, led to the diversification of trajectories, allowed for non-economic actors to also become active in the global debate and turned more complex the relation between national and local contexts and global processes.

Thus, there is more to emergence than mere economic performance. What has emerged in the past two decades of frantic experimentation with the discourse<sup>2</sup> of globalization are

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<sup>2</sup> I use the concept of discourse here in the sense attributed to it by Laclauian post-structuralist theory, influenced by Wittgenstein's idea of language games, French discourse analysis's conception of discourse as a

social formations with particular histories and cultural identities. One feature of these, to keep to my opening *fil conducteur*, is the ingrained dimension of inequality that has historically characterized them. It has been deepened but not initiated with neoliberalism. And some signs already show that political and cultural changes are essential to the task of reducing inequality at a significant pace. How can one make sense of persisting inequalities over the long term process of integration to capitalism in these societies<sup>3</sup>, with short periods of reversal but hardly being able to recast the pattern in the long run? Is there a reverse process whereby the current outlook of emerging societies sheds light on the situation in advanced capitalist societies? Can there be any learning from the efforts taking place in such emerging societies to overcome the perverse connection of economic performance, technological advancement and persisting injustice? This chapter, and others in this book, asserts the need to frame the notion of emergence in terms which go beyond economic and geopolitical logics of explanation, the need to incorporate reflection on sociocultural tenets. It is not framed within a politico-institutional or an economic perspective, but insists that critical analysis cannot shy away from the political character of any process of social institution. This does not mean approaching the question of emergence in terms of “power politics” or international geopolitics. However, it does imply that the political operates within every social dimension and cannot be evacuated from analysis with impunity.

There has been, to that effect, an ambiguous but extensive acknowledgement of the cultural dimension of these processes – not only in terms of cultural heritages and forms of experiencing and facing up to the challenge of inequality, but also in terms of increasingly resorting to culture as a remedy or strategic weapon against the effects of globalization *cum* growing inequality. This recourse to culture is ambiguous because it brings to the fore antagonistic demands for inclusion, justice and/or reparation from groups defined on the basis of cultural traits (ethnicity, gender, age, religion, language, sexuality, territorial autonomy), while culture also becomes an object of hegemonic struggle as an instrument of more effective market strategies, or the management of conflicts and social disintegration (cf. Yúdice, 2004).

So, the question of inequality is at once material and symbolic, economic and politico-cultural<sup>4</sup>. It calls for historical sensitivity (in other words, attention to particularities and trajectories, but also to contingency in how structural features have evolved into their present form) and for a global/local nexus. In the context of globalization, it is a question of *how different modes of articulation have varied as a function of local circumstances*. Through resistance, translation or failure, global capitalism has been altered as it is iterated<sup>5</sup>. And over the past decades, as a partial outcome of global trends, the trajectory of emerging

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material force, and pragmatic linguistic definitions of discourse, Laclau stresses that discourse necessarily implies language and action, linguistic and non-linguistic dimensions (cf. Laclau and Mouffe, 1989; Laclau, 2005; Howarth and Glynos, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> Latin American societies are part of the constitutive moments of the world capitalist system, as colonies of the Iberian powers, though their integration as independent nations dates from as early as the 1820s. The timing and modes of integration for contemporary emerging societies varies extensively, but one could say that the period from the 1930s can roughly be taken for a marker of the intensification of such a process.

<sup>4</sup> This view is put forward in passing by Amartya Sen, in his discussion of India’s global insertion. He both acknowledges the point that the key debate on globalization has to do with inequality and that how unequal the world is or has become is the object of heated dispute (cf. Sen, 2006, p. 341-342).

<sup>5</sup> I allude here to Derrida’s conception of iterability, which can help us deal with the question of repetition (or system expansion) without recourse to notions of reproduction or evolutionary understandings of change (cf. Derrida, 1982; 1990; Burity, 1994).

societies render all too explicit the contradictory and hardly predictable forms in which modernization, capitalism and globalization intermingle. Whether one speaks of China, India, Brazil, Mexico or South Africa, for instance, inequality is a prominent feature of their history, past and present, though with different characteristics. And perhaps, because globalization is not a one-way process, one can say that their story is fast becoming, retroactively, the story of the advanced societies of the North as they grapple with the combined effects of neoliberal or Third-Way politics, increased non-Western immigration and the rise of right-wing or conservative-liberal ideologies.

I wish to argue in this article that the manifold patterns of globalization in relation to inequality can give rise *both to the emergence of economic powers (again) rooted on widespread or deep social inequalities and to transversal forces – that cut across social domains (such as the economy, politics or cultural life), national borders, and social groups or classes – seeking to reinforce or to overturn those inequalities*. This requires a broader approach which encompasses various dimensions of social life that are crucial to understanding and acting upon inequality. Emerging countries such as those mentioned above experiment strong, sometimes lacerating, tensions between opening and closing themselves to external forces; modernising and resisting the exclusionary dimensions of modernity; relinquishing collective commitments to welfare and tackling mounting violence; joining the discourses on macroeconomics stability and responding to abject poverty; bringing to light cultural diversity, protecting it from dissolving into consumer culture and checking prejudice and intolerance. They also seem to portray the kinds of social arrangement globalization as it is currently evolving is likely to produce in most parts of the world: social and economic exclusion, ethnic clashes, racial prejudice, and violence, alongside startling affluence, consumerism and technological sophistication, whereas also allowing for cross-border articulation of social movements and progressive organizations, the dissemination of imagery of resistance and new repertoires of action which may assist local dissenting groups.

Moreover, these societies' cultural formation increasingly accounts for significant variations they have displayed in the course of their becoming global players (or is perceived to do so), but also for some of the lasting aspects of subordination and oppression that have marked modernization processes both in advanced capitalism and in the emerging semi-periphery of the capitalist world. This calls for heightened attention to the processes whereby difference is asserted *vis-à-vis* the dominant side of globalization as well as to the movements which, across borders, and mobilizing various values, social identities and repertoires of action, voice the need for equality and justice to prevail within and among nations.

In order to pursue this line, I take the Brazilian case not only to illustrate the process, but to raise a claim that goes in two directions: a) several of the current trends in the process of globalization are not entirely unheard-of in societies which have for a long time been part of the world created after the sixteenth-century colonial and the nineteenth-century imperialist expansions of Western European countries – former episodes of globalization<sup>6</sup>; b)

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<sup>6</sup> This is not new as a general point, having been put forward by different analysts of globalization, like Tilly, Robertson or Sen, who insist on the existence of previous processes of globalization. What I add to their view is the point that the colonial and postcolonial conditions “allowed” the subaltern societies to experience and develop responses, from the very beginning of their encounters with the West, to several features of present-day globalization, though this *avant-la-lettre* experience has taken place amidst the contradictory and unevenly

intermediary societies, located in the semi-periphery of the capitalist world, can be privileged points to make sense of several of the new developments introduced by the intensification of the global trends. Confronted with the Euro-American-centric paradigm of modernization and advanced capitalism (cf. Lander, 2005, p. 21-53; Quijano, 2005, p. 227-78), emerging societies fall far behind the social levelling (welfare) enjoyed by the majority of citizens in those societies included in the paradigm. They seem to be too marked by particularism to qualify for the new position.

However, as Santos argues, for those countries showing an intermediary level of development, “working out the calculus of hegemonic globalization is much more complex. To start with, there is at once some capacity to capitalize on the advantages and a reasonable vulnerability as regards the risks” (2002, p. 12). He mentions Ireland, Spain, Portugal, Greece, in Europe; Mexico, Brazil, Chile, Argentina, in South America, and adds, “[i]n the semi-peripheral countries, the conflicts and disjunctions provoked by the hegemonic globalization thus tend to be more intense and have more unpredictable effects” (Ibidem).

### *1. Global/local dynamics and the place of culture*

According to Santos (2002), in our transitional global system conflicts and the unequal exchanges that express and result from them crisscross. Thus, questions affecting the relative position of nation states; questions relating to the appropriation or valuation of mercantile resources between the global capitalist class and the nationally-based classes; and *questions regarding the recognition of the appropriation or valuation of non-mercantile resources such as ethnicity, identities, cultures, traditions, sense of belonging, imaginaries, rituals, or literature* – give light to composite, hybrid or dual conflicts. Among these questions, the latter kind has shown prominently for some time now. Whether evolving as a result of the global/local frictional logic leading to numerous forms of resistance, or being expressed through the dissemination of struggles for the recognition of subaltern identities, culture has become a catchword for the forms of politics that can redraw the boundaries of the political in our time. Thus, it is crucial for the analysis of the processes of globalization that one focuses on the *global/local dynamics* in order to capture such a cultural dimension. It has traditionally been through the metaphor of “the local” that *culture* has been understood – whether academically, politically or in the eyes of tourists and businesspeople –, and when talking about globalization many voices seem to point to a tension between global and local, while other voices celebrate the sheer diversity that global travels and media images disclose and bring near.

It can be easily shown that global and local are not irreconcilable poles. As several authors have already singled out, not only every successful globalization is *rooted* in a localism (Anglo-Saxon neoliberal discourse, for instance), but also globalization *presupposes* localization (that is, produces it elsewhere, through hierarchization or time-space compression) (Santos, 2002, p. 63-65; Burity, 2001, pp. 156-173). The global metaphor or

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developed dimensions of economic, social, political and cultural life that have marked those nations as “underdeveloped”, “poor” or “non-modern”. For several reasons, some of which will be spelled out here, such distinctive marks of the postcolonial, subaltern societies have been seen to revolve around the trappings of *cultural difference*, whereas in the Western capitalist societies the process was for a long time credited to world-historical laws of development dictated by reason and progress. Recent changes to this process, pointing to a decentring of the West, leading to the emergence of new loci of power outside Europe and America, have been responded to as a threat or civilizational crisis.

global concrete events (e.g., the announcement of a new policy; the negotiation of financial support for projects or to tackle crises; or a global meeting promoted by the UN, the World Economic or the World Social Forums) work as *tertiums* between inside and outside, near and distant, one's own and alien, etc.<sup>7</sup>, thus articulating the two poles. The *tertium* does not require the end of local references, but reinscribes them onto a terrain in which they can no longer be defined in isolation or by mere appeal to territorial or politico-cultural closure. Therefore, globalization both forms and distorts, requires and resists the singularity of the local (as community or nation, municipality or region). In turn, this *tertium* de-territorializes and de-institutionalizes the stability of the frontier between those reference points, though in manners fraught with paradoxes and ambiguities.

However, if it is true that a clear implication of the operation of the *tertium* of globalization is that *the local counts*, we must supplement the *de-territorialising* emphasis, and perhaps the impression left by the argument so far, in order to give due consideration to *(re)territorialising* practices. A good case for it is made by Arturo Escobar (2005, pp. 133-68), whose *demarche* also leads back into the theme of culture that lies at the heart of the analysis proposed here (cf. Santos, 2002, pp. 72-75; 2003). Escobar (2005, pp. 134-35) argues that the weakening of place in the discourses on globalization has brought serious consequences to our understanding of culture, knowledge, nature and the economy and that it is time to balance that.

Rather than essentializing the local as the decisive and unambiguous site of transformation, Escobar draws the attention to the concrete social contexts in which the effects of globalization are *translated – but also reconstructed – into vernacular cultures*, and which also demand to be heard in their own terms. He also highlights the need to counter the view that the only form of relation to reality in global times is through de-territorialized identities – privileging travel, mobility, nomadism, dislocation and diaspora and overlooking the rootedness of the majority of the people everywhere in the world (even those who migrate to other countries. For him, place is “a form of lived and rooted space”, “the location of a multiplicity of forms of cultural politics, that is, of the cultural becoming politics, as evidenced in the tropical forest social movements and other environmental movements” (Idem, p. 151-52).

Now, it is not hard to see how this move toward place, as an instance of the local, brings us close to notions of *culture and identity*. For many social groups, communities, cities, regions or even nations in the world affected by the spread and grip of globalization or global-talk, the transformations they have to negotiate or live with have a direct bearing on their forms of life and the way they perceive themselves and others. Global values and practices have often meant uprooting the local as a reference, weakening social bonds, introducing demands for which most people find themselves structurally incompetent or unable to meet, and draining in a perverse way their chances of sustainable living conditions.

On the other hand, global events or the effects of global flows in these contexts raise or prompt the awareness of cultural difference, thus imaginarily awakening, reinforcing, recreating or splitting particular identities, as well as giving rise to new ones. This is not just something which happens to local communities or social movements and organizations from

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<sup>7</sup> This image of the “third” can be found in several contemporary authors, like Bhabha, Laclau, Soja, or Derrida, with different applications and implications. In all of them, there is a clear discomfort with and disengagement from dualistic and binary thinking.

the outside. It is in the frontier(s) drawn by the differentiation or antagonism prompted by the global/local “encounter” that a sense of belonging, of particularity and of project emerges<sup>8</sup>.

There is, nonetheless, a second form in which culture – in between local and global – can also qualify what emerges in the global scenario as a force. It could be called the cultural rooting of capitalist development. Recognition of this goes back a long way and different theoretical perspectives have been brought to bear on this (cf. e.g., Amin, 1989; King, 1991; Wallerstein, 1993; Putnam et al., 1993; Appadurai, 1996; Robbins, 2004; Eisenstadt, 2002). As I see it, this is a route of dissemination (Derrida), running both toward disavowing the theory of reproduction (according to which capitalism spreads and repeats itself “at its core” wherever it goes) and toward asserting the modern character of capitalism in the so-called periphery. Cultural determination of the form and content of capitalism is not, therefore, a particularism of the periphery, but is a defining trait of the phenomenon as a whole. The view according to which emerging societies' distinctive capitalist development is both a function and expression of their cultural specificity proves ethnocentric: globalization helps highlight the cultural rooting of Western capitalist societies as they encounter competition and resistance from other (subaltern) capitalist societies.

This form of expression of culture allows us to see in the historical process of capitalist development, and its hegemonic global configuration, both the element of dissemination and the element of cultural particularism – understood not as an idiosyncrasy but as the outcome of symbolic disputes for the definition of the real among social actors – whereby the former is “translated” and reshaped. In the global juncture, when there are signs of new powers emerging as “national” variants of global capitalism, this second form of cultural expression can be illuminating of trends that – following our point about the de-territorialization and de-institutionalization of the frontier between global and local – are in operation in the global scenario, in different ways. It helps perceive as well the cultural dimension of exploitation, subordination and inequality that is often overlooked by analyses of globalization focused on economic dynamics. Culture, here, both illustrates how capitalism takes roots and how its intimations are invariably negotiated by local elites or consumer publics and adapted to local mores, whether reinforcing asymmetries or contributing to dislocate them.

Let us now see, in the Brazilian case, how this double dimension of resistance and conformity as regards the links between global and local operates.

### *3. Brazil: conservative, selective modernization and the naturalization of inequality*

Brazil, as one in the list of emerging societies/economies/political powers, is a telling example of the meanderings of modernization in a post-colonial situation. Let us take a quick look at this by means of a cultural approach that highlights the ways in which modernity was historically constituted there. This will be done in two moments: first, by assessing in this section the way in which the legacy of slavery – and the enormous difficulty for modern Brazil to integrate its Afro-descendant population into the social, economic and political mainstream – qualifies a double feature of the process: elitism and social exclusion; and

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<sup>8</sup> A good example of such a complex take on the importance of locality (which must be understood both in spatial and symbolic terms) is the discussion offered by Silva (2006) on the adoption and implementation of affirmative action policies in Brazil and South Africa in favour of black (and poor) students in public higher education.



second, in the next section, by taking up the case of public policy in order to see how contests for the definition of inclusion have, as from the 1990s, involved both cultural demands and appeals to globalization.

A startling trait of this emerging society is the clear contrast between its economic complexity, cultural diversity, and vexing social inequality. It is a clear case of the non-necessary correspondence between economic growth and sophistication and a fair share of the common citizens in their country's wealth. Brazil exhibits the kind of articulation that risks becoming the stable outcome of current forces driving globalization. It witnesses to how insane it is, as Jessé Souza argues,

“to imagine that economic growth can do now what it has failed to accomplish over 50 years. In all countries that homogenized their classes ... – England, the United States, France – the driving force was not economic growth. In capitalist systems, growth generally produces more inequality. It has been religious, cultural, moral and political demands that extended the model of being bourgeois toward the lower classes” (Souza and Pinheiro, 2003).

I am not endorsing Beck's image of the “Brazilianization” of the world, as if the whole story were about the Brazilian failure to promote social integration and pacify everyday life. I am rather making a point about the articulation of economic modernization with social inequality as a ubiquitous mark of hegemonic globalization as portrayed in the trajectory of Brazilian capitalism (cf. Nunes, 2002, pp. 301-44)<sup>9</sup>. As argued by Jessé Souza, a leading Brazilian social theorist, the decisions resulting in the particular form taken by the capitalist order in Brazil, particularly as from the late-19<sup>th</sup> century, were not a surrender to a pre-modern personalistic and patrimonialistic Iberian tradition, but already an outcome of deep processes of modernization:

“the naturalization of social inequality in peripheral countries of recent modernization, such as Brazil, may be more adequately perceived as a consequence, not stemming from an alleged pre-modern and personalistic heritage, but precisely the opposite, that is, as resulting from an effective process of modernization of great proportions which increasingly takes over the country as from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. In this sense, my argument implies that our inequality and its everyday naturalization is modern, for it binds the efficacy of modern values and institutions based on their successful import ‘from outside in’. Thus, rather than being personalistic, it [such inequality, JAB] draws its effectiveness from the ‘impersonalism’ typical of modern values and institutions” (2003, p. 17).

In that case, any application of the notion of “Brazilianization” to the global context would have to do with the recognition of the modern and indeed contemporary character of inequality in these semi-peripheral capitalist societies. That would work more as a mirror than as a threat of a fallback into the pre-modern past.

The roots of Brazilian inequality have a long provenance. Let me step back to the last years of the Brazilian Empire, and start with the important political manifesto “Abolitionism”, written by Joaquim Nabuco in 1883 (cf. Nabuco, 2000; see also Mello, 2000). Nabuco is one of the first interpreters – and political actors – of Brazil to confer the theme of

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<sup>9</sup> As regards Brazil, the process has been variously designated. Two of the more forceful arguments have developed around the concepts of “conservative modernization” and “selective modernization”. Both emphasize the singularity of Brazilian modernization and, by the same token, insist on its being a case of modernity – rather than a deviation from or a falling short of it. Cf. Domingues, 2002; 2006; Souza, 2000; 2007.

slavery a central place in his analysis of the country's historical formation and also of its social and political destiny (cf. Mello, 1999; Carvalho, 2000). There were very few of them in his own time and even in the next generation, when he is only matched by Gilberto Freyre, in the 1920s, though the latter drew out other conclusions, contributing to articulate the myth of racial democracy that became part of the 1930s state ideology. Souza comments that the importance of the institution of slavery in Brazil is strikingly overlooked by many interpretations of Brazil, focused as they have been on determining the conditions and hindrances for the transplantation of European capitalist and liberal democratic modernization. He comments,

"This aspect is symptomatic for, after all, that is the only institution that managed, in such a young nation, to last almost 400 years and disseminate, though under peculiar forms, to every region, encompassing the whole of a huge territory. It has been the interests organically linked to slavery that allowed for maintaining the unity of the vast Brazilian territory and it has also been slavery ... that determined even the mode of living peculiar to the Brazilian free person" (Souza, 2003, p. 103).

On the first pages of "Abolitionism", Nabuco stresses that the abolition would be only the immediate task of the movement, whose much more demanding responsibility was to reverse the effects of over three centuries of slavery in Brazilian society (Nabuco, 2000, p. 4). An indication of the long term difficulties facing the movement was already given in the very attitude of the country's political elite in not tackling slavery. Though acknowledging its immorality and economic inefficiency, the elite did not promote the immediate extinction of slavery, rather announcing incremental legal measures (the first of which dated from 1850, thirty-eight years before abolition!) which left the former nearly untouched (Idem, p. 15-18, 51-56).

Nabuco is explicit about the reach and depth of slavery in the making of society's ethos, in all areas:

"The same as with the word *abolitionism*, the word *slavery* is used in this book in its broad sense. The latter does not only mean the relation of slave and master; it means much more: the sum of power, influence, capital and *clientèle* of all masters; feudalism, established in the hinterland; the dependency in which commerce, religion, poverty, industry, the Parliament, the Crown, the State, find themselves before the aggregate power of the aristocratic minority, in whose lodgings [*senzalas*] thousands of these human beings live, brutalized and morally mutilated by the very regime that subjects them; and last, the spirit, the vital principle which animates the institution as a whole, especially as it starts to fear the loss of the immemorial property rights it is entitled to, a spirit that has been throughout the history of slave-holding countries the cause of their backwardness and ruin" (2000, p. 5).

Nabuco's greatest fortune was that, while writing in 19<sup>th</sup>-century England and drawing ethical inspiration from its abolitionist movement, he was not "up to date" with the scientific racist theories of the time in continental Europe (Morton's, Lombroso's or Gobineau's, for instance), that explained and forecast the road to modernity as an intrinsic attribute of the white, Western culture – thus eschewing any possibility for a country of mixed race(s) to be capable of such a feat. This allowed him to give due appreciation to *the indissoluble link between the destiny of blacks and freedom for all* in Brazil. His straightforward Hegelianism emerges in his assertion that the identities of masters and slaves were mutually dependent:

“The question in Brazil is not, like in the European colonies, that of a generous movement on behalf of men [sic] victim of unjust oppression in far-away shores. The black race is not for us an inferior race either, alien to communion or isolated from it, and whose well-being affects us in the same way as any indigenous tribe ill-treated by the European invaders. For us, the black race is an element of considerable national importance, strictly bounded by infinite organic relations to our constitution, an integral part of the Brazilian people. On the other hand, emancipation does not mean only to bring to an end the injustice of which the slave is a martyr, but it is also the simultaneous elimination of both opposing types, who are at bottom the same: the slave and the master” (Idem, p. 10).

Current indicators show Nabuco’s fears and inclusionary views to be warranted. Official data from the Brazilian Monitoring Report of the Millennium Development Goals point out that between 1992 and 2002, the 20% poorest held 3% of the total income of families came to share 4.2% of the total income. However, in the same period, their distance in relation to the wealthy hardly changed: “In 1992, the wealthiest 20% had 55.7% of the national income. In 1996, they had 55.8% and in 2002, 56.8%”. If one controls these figures by ethnic origin, the blacks stand out as the worst off: “The distribution of these groups within the poorest 10%, on the one hand, and within the wealthiest 1%, on the other, shows that 86% of those in the most privileged class were white, while 65% of the poorest were blacks or mulattoes” (Ipea; IBGE, 2004, pp. 15-16). In terms of education, “[y]oung whites aged 15 to 17 in secondary education have almost double the attendance of young blacks and mulattos. In higher education, this difference increases fourfold. And this same picture is found in all the regions in the country” (Idem, p. 26). From the income perspective:

“even among those with 12 or more years of schooling, the white population had an hourly wage almost 40% higher than that of the black and mulatto population with the same schooling level. In addition to the discrimination that is expressed by the occupation of posts requiring similar schooling levels with lower remuneration, the explanation of this phenomenon is also related to the issue of occupational segmentation. Thus, being a woman and part of the black and mulatto population makes it harder to earn higher wages” (Idem, p. 38).

The Brazilian dilemma, in this light, according to Jessé Souza, is not the permanence of residues of personalistic power within an evolving modern order. It is not a case for personalism, patrimonialism, or the persistence of pre-modernity within the post-1889 Republican order – as many sociological interpretations insist. For him, the dilemma is *how the impersonal capitalist moral order, finally hegemonic in the 1930s, manages to constitute itself on the basis of a naturalization of inequality*. Having imposed the institutions of the modern world – state, market, individualism, impersonal institutional relations, competition, citizenship – as ready-made products, without also disseminating a moral understanding of social relations that both legitimated the limitation of the rulers’ personal power and generalized a “basic” human type as a general reference of social recognition and a condition for the full operation of the competitive order, the Brazilian modern capitalist order condemns to oblivion and exclusion millions of its citizens – particularly its Afro-descendants (cf. Souza, 2003; 2007).

Since the early 1800s, a process of “Europeization” in course was set off, inciting a special attraction toward anything British or French, rather than Portuguese, as Souza highlights, following the arrival of the royal family in Brazil, fleeing from Bonaparte’s armies. The process also ushered in women’s visibility in the private realm (freeing them from total

subjection and isolation), and the growing prestige of knowledge and individual talent. This process was virtually accomplished in the 1930s, with the adoption of Italian-inspired corporatism, the political inclusion of the middle classes and the (legal and political) incorporation of urban workers (Cf. Idem, pp. 137-148; Carvalho, 1997; Vianna and Carvalho, 2000). Meanwhile, associated to the image of inferior, non-European races by the artificers of the republican order, blacks and the poor in general were abandoned to themselves, deemed less human than the integrated ones, irrespective of any deliberate feeling of rejection the latter might personally entertain against any of the wretched ones – which is how the contours of an impersonal order emerged!

So, the generalization of the non-recognition of the poor – particularly the blacks – as a full human being and a full citizen is a distinctive mark of Brazilian specificity *vis-à-vis* so-called advanced societies (cf. Souza, 2003, pp. 170-180). Brazilian modernity was constructed by articulating external models (institutions and values) to the moral matrix of slavery. Given the social attitudes of indifference, disgust and intolerance (Christophe Dejours's banalization of injustice) that have proliferated in many countries where the combined effects of neoliberalism and globalization have settled and the growing number of people counted for nothing in the new economic order, one can argue that such a trait loses its particularism in present-day global contexts and articulates a sombre warning as regards the combination of capitalism and naturalized inequalities.

Some indicators of mounting inequality and manifestations of rejection for the poor, the immigrants and ethnic minorities can be easily found in any perusal of academic or official literature. Take just the 2005 Human Development Report. From the start, the message is clear: "The world's richest 500 individuals have a combined income greater than that of the poorest 416 million. Beyond these extremes, the 2.5 billion people living on less than \$2 a day – 40% of the world's population – account for 5% of global income. The richest 10%, almost all of whom live in high-income countries, account for 54%" (UNDP 2005, p. 4; see, for perceptions of the early 2000s, Sen [2002]; Weisbrot [2002]). The Report forecasts that if current trends persist, the gaps will only grow. In relation to the Millenium Development Goals (MDG), such trends show that by 2015, there will be "more than 41 million children who will die before their fifth birthday from the most readily curable of all diseases – poverty". In relation to poverty, there will be "an additional 380 million people living on less than \$1 a day". As regards primary education, 47 million children will still be out of school in 2015 (UNDP, 2005, p. 5). The Report is skeptical about the effects of globalization on inequality:

"when it comes to income, global integration has ushered in a new era of convergence. At best, the sentiment is weakly supported by the evidence. Poverty is falling, but slowly since the mid-1990s. Meanwhile, global inequality remains at extraordinarily high levels.

In the aggregate the past two decades have witnessed one of the most rapid reductions in poverty in world history. However, any assessment of trends in income poverty has to take into account large variations across regions. (...)

The worrying trend for the future is that overall progress is slowing. Much of the success in pushing back poverty over the past two decades was achieved in the 1980s and the first half of the 1990s. Since the mid-1990s \$1 a day poverty has been falling at one fifth the 1980–96 rate. This is despite the fact that average growth for

developing countries picked up in the 1990s, increasing at more than double the per capita rate of the previous decade" (Idem, p. 33-34; see also p. 36-37).

There have been counter-evidences to that pessimism, as will be seen below. Lower levels of poverty in the context of rather conventional social policy instruments are certainly connected to different political choices implemented as from 2003 which only very recently can be felt in official statistics. They demonstrate the options available even when political agency is not bold enough to confront the pro-market orthodoxy. But the general trend is clear: we are still dealing with one of the most unequal societies in the world that has remained consistently so while it experienced deep advances of the market logic and decisive integration to the contemporary global economic, political and cultural flows.

#### *4. Global pressures, global articulations and cultural awareness in public policy-making discourse*

If the argument offered above seems to hide a certain a-synchronism with the sophisticated features of technological innovation and social discourses of competition, free market, mass consumption and pluralism under the current phase of globalization, the 1990s brought this disjunction to a moot point. With the election of Fernando Collor de Mello in November 1989 and his inauguration in January 1990, Brazil definitively joined the neoliberal *doxa*, starting with a series of liberalising measures which gave great emphasis to open markets for foreign competition and the whole range of modernising strategies associated with the big corporations. Many companies closed down, many jobs were lost. Technological and managerial changes came in and the wonders of being (after all!) attuned to "modernity" were loudly and relentlessly voiced by political, intellectual and entrepreneurial elites!

This is then the time when everyone everywhere seemed to have found one word to sum up the changing times: globalization. As in every case of dissemination of new imaginaries, it was not so much shared contents or precise definitions that mattered, but the imaginary and non-systematic connections made by users between the issues they were struggling with and the general motif of a majestic external force prescribing (more) modernization as the only future ahead for (semi)peripheral societies. To be sure, very few people knew what they were talking about, but they seemed all hard pressed to include references to globalization in any talk about the world newly emerging from the exhaustion of military-led developmentalist projects, the worsening social conditions under the post-1985 civilian government, and the crisis of really existing socialism. In all this, media discourse played a major part in popularising ordinary talk of globalization and multiplying information and images from near and far that seemed to escalate into a broad picture of a process that could not be resisted *since* it was "happening everywhere".

A different matter is the direct incorporation of neoliberal theoretical and practical arguments about the need for downsizing the state, freeing it from the "authoritarian" legacy of interventionism, high taxation, administrative inefficiency and social spending. For this, consultants were hired, studies were conducted, visits were planned, a new breed of public servants was trained, and an articulate political project was drafted. In 1994, the election of Fernando Henrique Cardoso, in the wake of the most successful anti-inflation policy ever implemented in Brazil, gave rise to a distinctive "third-way" discourse, combining neoliberal emphases on competition, free market, privatization and managerialism with social democratic trappings regarding commitment to fairness, care for the poorest among

the poor, limited income distribution and more participation of beneficiaries in public policy making. During two terms in office, Cardoso led a number of reforms that included structural adjustment policies and a changing social policy profile that valued elements like “active citizenship”, “partnership with civil society”, “focus on outcomes rather than bureaucratic processes”, the development of a “culture of evaluation”, and recognition of identity, culture and pluralism in the definition of policy goals and procedures (cf. Burity, 2006b).

In all this, the typical note is the reference to globalization as the horizon from which those changes got their intelligibility. The irreversibility of the process was said to dictate the adoption of proposed measures regardless of ideological persuasion. The economic logic expanded toward the whole range of processes of deliberation and decision-making at the policy level, justifying “the bitterness of the remedy” in the name of the greater cure for the evils of backwardness and statism. Nobody could dare opt out of the only way forward (*pensée unique*). As the Minister for Administration and State Reform, Luiz Carlos Bresser Pereira, bluntly put before a beleaguered nationwide audience of Brazilian social scientists in October 1995, who rejected his reasons for reforming public administration and withdraw the state from direct implementation of social programmes: “It is a pity you’re choosing to miss the train of history!”

The 1990s juncture brought together several developments which, though not necessarily requiring a reference to globalization, nonetheless tended to draw legitimacy from it, thus reinforcing its justification. As regards practical politics and political culture, one can mention the dissemination of pro-market values and policies, intolerance against ideas that privileged or prescribed state regulation and direct provision of public goods; paradoxically, intense state activism (particularly from the Executive) in promoting changes to the institutional and legal frameworks in order to accommodate the new capitalist culture. Simultaneously, there was an emphasis on civil society proactive initiatives in finding solutions for the problems that either could no longer be resolved by the state or should not be left to its responsibility, as well as a heightened sensitivity toward an agenda of civic activism and identity issues coming from the global circulation of such discourses that originated in the advanced societies new social movements and NGO networks. Many cultural and identity demands were transformistically incorporated by international financial institutions in the period, leading to a legitimation of them which caused their becoming part of conditionalities imposed by the former on the countries that sought funding for projects, crises or debt alleviation.

Social movements organized around identity issues – gender, racism, access to culture, religion, etc. – slowly articulated a discourse in which their demands expressed the multidimensional character of exclusion and inequality as well as the persistence or slow improvement with which these demands were met vis-à-vis the advances in economic performance. Such discourse also highlighted the extent to which there were cultural reasons behind the paucity of the significant changes to the problems faced by those movements’ participants (cf. Dagnino, Escobar, Alvarez, 1998; Avritzer, 2002; Gohn, 1997; Scherer-Warren, 1999).

Several public policies introduced pieces and bits of this new social movement agenda, as long as they fitted the government views: in land reform, health, education, social welfare, environmental programmes issues of gender, race, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, and multiculturalism became part of the considerations and oriented some decisions. Brazil actively participated in the UN conferences cycle started with Eco-92 in Rio, and voiced on

those different occasions rather progressive official positions on women's, blacks', indigenous people's and environmental rights, and the cultural dimension was incrementally accepted into development views and strategies. Cultural policy proper has clearly moved toward adopting discourses of cultural pluralism or multiculturalism – even though several of its components actually clash or sit uneasily with the historic trajectory of multicultural relations in the country, strongly oriented toward syncretism and hybrid identities, and not so mono-cultural as European and American identity politics. This was not unrelated to the dissemination-effect of transnational organizations, the international cooperation for development and the first echoes of an emerging global civil society onto domestic governmental discourse.

On the other hand, culture and globalization also became part of counter-hegemonic discourses. Brazilian social movements and the increasingly salient field of the non-governmental organizations, truly globalized from the early 1990s, slowly incorporated the new cultural discourse twisting it toward calls for solidarity and global mobilization in order to resist the dark side of its neoliberal hegemonic project and bend the obtuseness of conservative elites or even the prevailing general culture of society regarding workers' and minorities' rights, not to mention human rights as an indivisible group of rights and social obligations. As most of the groups that appropriated such vocabulary in the articulation of their demands operated locally and at small-scale projects, the impact over a decade of this new discursive context can already be felt by merely over-viewing their public statements, project drafts and internal discussion documents. Even the labour union movement has moved in that direction and is firmly involved in providing space for cultural demands in the conduction of its cadre formation policy and in its participation of networks where such demands are crucial (cf. Burity, 2006a, b).

In all these developments, the role of globalization, as rhetoric or in terms of the real effects of its flows and concrete actors' interventions, has marked the new face of Brazilian society, particularly its political and economic elites, since the 1990s: still unable to sort out its huge inequality record, prey to a certain fatalistic realism about the possibilities of change in the global scenario, but gladly joining the chorus of those who take the recent trends for the final accomplishment of the unfinished project of modernity. The past few years have witnessed some degree of self-assertion in Brazilian foreign policy and the grip of global discourses became subject to more complex negotiations in public policy. Some authors and official data have drawn attention to falling rates of inequality and poverty, but are cautious regarding its sustainability (cf. Néri, 2007; Góis, 2007; Brazil, 2007, p. 12, 27-30, *passim*).

The previous two sections allow for a number of points to be made. It would be pathetic to deny the long-term roots of unequal social relations in the constitution of modern Brazil. Although it sits increasingly out of joint with the advances in social organization of the subaltern groups, the social, political and cultural background of present-day ails remains, reproducing a pattern of non-recognition of the poor, women, blacks and other discriminated groups that is reflected in the figures of inequality. Just as, in the wane of slavery, millions of Brazilian former slaves and their descendents formed a mass of invisible citizens, to whom rights were lacking and social integration was denied through their confinement in the urban slums, out schools, health care and decent jobs, the path of opening toward globalization has not altered these circumstances. On top of economic deprivation, most Brazilian poor being also Afro-descendents – though representing over 45 % of the population – have also had to face racial discrimination that no upward mobility of

the few successful ones has been able to appease. Gender and racial exclusion combine, still, to victimize black women even more deeply.

Naturalized inequality, which in Brazil has been coupled with an enduring bias against its Afro-descendent population and gives a racial twist to poverty, educational and income levels, job availability and even political representation, converged with the global/local post-1989 dynamics. The drive toward competition, efficiency, market relations and disarticulation of the nation state regulatory powers which was introduced then generated and spread corporate, political and social attitudes of demeaning toward unemployed, illiterate or under-schooled people. Several arguments and forms of everyday derogatory or stigmatising discourse formerly used to express racial prejudice came back, apparently without the racial sting, in order to spot or assess the new order's outcasts or misfits.

However, if the global lesson of Brazil's rise is the dire need of squaring global demands and social demands, there are counter-tendencies in action. The setting of globalization is wider and more complex than mere economic readings would warrant. In different and interwoven ways, the rise of new social movements intersect with the translocal enactment of globalized networks for equality, justice, peace and environmental awareness, and with pressures from powerful international organizations (in turn prompted by governmental and non-governmental demands) for the adoption of complex forms of social equality. Part of this process has involved a double mobilization of cultural resources: on the one hand, by revealing the symbolic dimensions of exclusion, poverty, violence, the operation of political institutions and procedures, the values and imaginaries on which they are produced, sustained or confronted; on the other hand, by constituting new forms of identification on the basis of identity traits other than class or socio-economic conditions.

Such a mobilization has led in several directions: a) the widening of social demands beyond material distribution of resources; b) the acknowledgement that cultural constraints on social development, represented by entrenched forms of life or identity claims, can not be uprooted with impunity without damaging valuable means ordinary people have to cope with major social changes while retaining their protagonist role in the process; c) global flows may serve local struggles for democracy and social justice, but they are still biased toward a certain conception of market freedom that is just as particularistic as any local road to development. In order to articulate or furthering these claims, a global/local dialectics was put to work in contextual ways. With and against each other, local and global actors produced a tangle of initiatives that has cut deep into the fabric of the contemporary Brazilian social formation.

Whether Brazil, as an emerging power, for all its complex articulation of local and global features, economic advance and social unevenness, can meet the challenge of contemporary discourses on social and environmental justice and match some of the well established global partners is a matter of political action as much as of social and cultural change. However, its rise in the present juncture is telling, both for its reiteration of a lasting failure of capitalism to harmonize economic freedom with social equality, pointing to what extent globalization can give us more of the same, and for showing what role cultural politics – understood as symbolic disputes for the meaning and direction of social situations and processes, as well as the political mobilization of identities as symptoms of social failure to produce inclusion and justice – can play in the present and the future.



Culture counts, for there is no social process without symbolic, signifying practices, and because many of the contemporary points of political antagonism turn around cultural differences. Fighting inequality, therefore, involves both cultural struggles and cultural sensitivity but cannot take place outside political agency. This is still what the emergence of so-called global South (one more sweeping, big word meant to encompass such distinct cases) keeps in reserve: it is a promise of alternative paths, with some steps taken, but the assessment of whether it is going must make room for hegemonic stalemates and political drawbacks along the way.

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